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ABSTRACT

The need for appropriate diagnostic and measurement tools for Hispanics and other minority students is emphasized by: (1) problems experienced in properly placing students in language programs as mandated by the provisions of the 1974 "Lau versus Nichols" court decision; (2) the likelihood that Hispanic students will perform poorly in current minimal competency tests that do not reflect their cultural educational experiences; and (3) the overrepresentation of Blacks and Hispanics in special education classes. No one test can fairly evaluate any child. What is needed is a set of multiple assessment techniques that will explore the child's total development. Such techniques would include criterion referenced tests, systematic observation, language dominance and language proficiency testing, medical evaluation, use of home environment data, and determination of children's learning styles. In addition, the quality of evaluation should be assured through continuous monitoring, recruitment of competent evaluators, and emphasis on the teacher's role in guaranteeing fair evaluation of the child. (Author/MJL)

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ASSESSMENT OF HISPANICS:

SHIFTING THE BURDEN

UD 022 560

Paper presented by Alba N. Ambert at the Eastern Regional Conference on Hispanic Educational Issues: La Próxima Decada, on March 7, 1980, in New York City.

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I. Introduction

Tests are important pedagogical tools. If used with caution, tests can provide invaluable information on students' academic skills, intellectual development, areas of strengths and weaknesses and adaptive behavior. Unfortunately, tests have frequently been misused to label, stigmatize, track and deny educational opportunities to minority children. Tests which are standardized on white middle-class populations are administered to minority children and results interpreted without taking into account the differences between the two groups. Minority children, therefore, score low on tests which do not reflect their experiences and values. Once labeled with a low score, Hispanics and other minorities face the probability of placement in classes for the mentally retarded, denial of access to advanced placement, or tracking into low ability groups. In order to neutralize the potential misinterpretation of tests, alternative assessment methods must be developed and implemented to insure nonbiased evaluation of Hispanic students.

In this paper I will explore the assessment of Hispanics in different areas in an attempt to arrive at feasible alternatives to standardized testing. Intelligence tests, language dominance and language proficiency tests, minimal competency testing and special education testing will be briefly analyzed. Alternative evaluation methods will then be discussed, as well as the role of evaluators, school districts and teachers in the evaluation process of Hispanic children.

II. Assessments

Intelligence tests.

Claims as to the inappropriateness of intelligence tests for minority children are abundant (De Avila and Havassy, undated; Gonzalez, 1974; and Gerken, 1978). Hispanic youngsters tend to perform more poorly than their white middle-class counterparts on standardized tests. Test performance creates a vicious circle in which low test scores result in placement in lower level groups. Children fail to maximize their potential, their self-concept suffers, and soon they are performing according to test results and teacher expectations (Samuda, 1975). The tests' predictive capacity is not a virtue of the test design. Test results contribute substantially to the self-fulfilling prophecy. To a great extent tests do not predict performance, but create elements conducive to specific behavior patterns. This is especially true in tests administered to Hispanic youngsters in which their true potential is not identified.

A number of factors influence Hispani children's low performance on intelligence tests. Language, culture and socioeconomic status are some of the most important variables affecting test performance.

Language.

Frequently Hispanic children of limited English proficiency are evaluated in English. It is obvious that in this situation children's performance will be far below their competence in the areas assessed. At times Hispanic children may "seem" proficient in Eng ish when in

fact they have mastered the phonological component of the English language, but not the areas of syntax, morphology and semantics. In cases of Hispanic English-speaking children, the standard English utilized in intelligence tests may be unfamiliar to them. Although they may be able to perform the tasks, they cannot understand directions well enough to discern what is expected of them.

Culture.

In attempting to develop testing procedures appropriate for children of limited English proficiency, translations of widely used tests have been performed. Translations present a number of problems, though. One of the most important objections to translations is that intelligence tests are not culturally relevant to the Hispanic youngster. Test items are geared to the values, beliefs and experiences of white middle-class populations. Tests are developed by white middle-class professionals. Translations alone will not eliminate the cultural biases inherent in test items. Problem-solving techniques, vocabulary and experiences reflected in intelligence tests are culture-specific to Anglo Saxon populations. As such, IQ tests have been said to be culturally anglocentric (Gonzalez, 1974).

Socioeconomic status.

The urban and rural poor traditionally score lower than middle class youngsters in intelligence tests. Children whose experiences are different, who have not been exposed to the values, material goods and language of the middle class child will be at a disadvantage when

taking tests that focus on the values of a higher socioeconomic group. Given the fact that the proportion of poverty among Hispanic families in the United States is double the national average (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1976), Hispanic children tend to fall within the level of poverty and are apt to experience difficulties in understanding test items in intelligence measures.

It has been amply documented that intelligence tests reflect the culture, values and language of white middle class populations. Hispanic youngsters who do not share these characteristics are unduly penalized for not having the experiences of the dominant class.

Language dominance and language proficiency testing.

In the Lau vs. Nichols 1974 decision, the Supreme Court mandates that school districts must provide non-English-speaking children with "a meaningful opportunity to participate in the public educational program." The Lau decision prompted the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to require that districts receiving federal funds identify all children whose home language was other than English. OCR subsequently issued guidelines to be followed in identifying and placing students of limited English proficiency. These guidelines, known as the Lau Remedies, are an attempt to assist districts in categorizing children according to language patterns. Today, children of limited English proficiency are tested and placed in programs according to one of the following Lau categories:

A. Monolingual speaker of the language other than English (speaks the language other than English exclusively).

B. Predominantly speaks the language other than English (speaks mostly the language other than English but speaks some English).

C. Bilingual (speaks both the language other than English and English with equal ease).

D. Predominantly speaks English (speaks mostly English but some of the language other than English).

E. Monolingual speaker of English (speaks English exclusively).

The Lau Categories offer very broad definitions of students' language performance and offer no provisions as to their level of proficiency in the native language and in English. There are children who may not fit into any of these categories. Some children may speak both their native language and English with difficulty. The fact that a child is placed in Category C, for example, says nothing about the child's proficiency in the languages spoken, academic strengths and weaknesses, level of functioning, learning style, and so forth. Programmatic recommendations are made on the basis of home surveys and language dominance testing.

After issuance of the OCR guidelines, a frantic search for appropriate language dominance tests ensued. It was soon discovered that most language dominance tests focus on a particular aspect of language while not considering other linguistic components. Very few instruments attempt to measure the students' language performance.

Although Lau Remedies encourage prescriptive methods for student placement, most tests currently available do not make provisions for diagnosing and remediating language difficulties which may be revealed in test results. They categorize students according to ability or inability to perform specific linguistic tasks, but the tests rarely offer prescriptive recommendations.

The second stage in the Lau compliance planning (after language dominance has been established) requires school districts to provide language proficiency levels in students' native language, for categories A and B, and in both languages for category C. Establishing language proficiency in Spanish requires knowledge of stages in Spanish language acquisition in children and the application of this knowledge to children's linguistic development. Gender, for example, is established late in Spanish-speakers. When assessing a six year old's Spanish-language proficiency, gender cannot be expected to be firmly acquired. To date, the research on acquisition of Spanish as a first language has been limited.

OCR's effectiveness in investigating violations, identifying issues and demanding Lau Compliance Plans from school districts cannot be negated. A recurrent problem has emerged in the area of monitoring Lau Compliance Plans. OCR's monitoring efforts consist basically of periodic reports submitted by school districts. Close scrutiny of the Lau process is not carried out. As a result of this, some school districts have changed language dominance test results to avoid the establishment of bilingual programs. If the Lau Compliance Plans are to be effective and implemented appropriately, close monitoring of the Lau process is needed.

Minimal competency testing.

As school districts follow the trend towards basic skills improvement and establish minimum standards for promotion and graduation, the need to scrutinize minimal competency testing for Hispanic students becomes apparent.

Minimum competency programs include development of state level graduation tests or tests to evaluate students' competency on a grade-to-grade basis. Some minimal competency programs set a level of minimum competency in reading, math, and language skills at a particular grade level. Other programs emphasize survival skills, such as filling out forms, writing checks, etc. Some school districts incorporate both areas into their graduation requirements.

Testing to determine levels of proficiency in academic areas has serious implications for linguistic minority students. First, if minimal competency tests do not reflect the cultural,linguistic and educational experiences of Hispanic youngsters, they are most likely to fail. Factors such as timing, use of standard English, irrelevant content, may adversely influence test performance. Second, students in bilingual programs may experience a watered-down curriculum in which requirements are not as strict as in the standard curriculum. Often bilingual programs lack sufficient equipment and materials and teachers are frequently inexperienced and/or not qualified to teach in bilingual programs. These factors may cause children in bilingual programs to fail minimal competency tests developed for students within the standard curriculum program. Translations alone will not remedy the situation.

In Massachusetts the Board of Education (1978) notified all school districts that students in bilingual and special education programs are exempt from minimum competency standards and testing. The double standard is thus applied. Bilingual children are considered less capable than children within the standard curriculum to acquire basic skills. Children in bilingual programs are furthermore compared to special needs students in their inability to attain the necessary skills to survive in society. Instead of developing appropriate tests for the bilingual program, linguistic minorities were declared exempt from minimal competency standards and testing.

Special education testing.

The overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic children in special education programs has been well documented (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1978; Mercer, 1971). Placement in special education programs is frequently based on children's performance on intelligence tests. Mercer found that in interpreting IQ test results, evaluators did not consider sociocultural factors which influence student's performance. Minority children were evaluated according to white middle-class standards and placed in special education programs based on their low test scores.

Special education test abuses are many. Often tests are administered in English to children of limited English proficiency. Purportedly bilingual psychologists, who are not fluent in the child's native

language and unfamiliar with the child's cultural background, perform biased assessments. In other instances the inherent bias in test content will affect a child's performance. Hispanics are often referred for special education evaluation due to inability to speak English or to school staff's general lack of sensitivity to linguistic and cultural differences. Appropriate behavior in the child's culture may be deemed inappropriate within the culture-determined values of the school. A child's reticence before an Anglo authority figure may be termed verbal deficiency, for example. A Hispanic youngster may, therefore, be referred for special education assessment on the basis of linguistic and cultural differences.

Public Law 94-142 mandates nondiscriminatory testing and evaluation. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) specifically states that children have a right to a thorough assessment of the nature and degree of specific disability, in a non-discriminatory manner and with no single measurement being the sole criterion for evaluation. Evaluation is defined by Public Law 94-142 as:

> procedures used ... to determine whether a child is handicapped and the nature and extent of the special education and related services that the child needs. The term means procedures used selectively with an individual child and does not include basic tests administered to or procedures used with all children in a school, grade or class. (Federal Register, August 23, 1977, p. 42494)

Evaluation procedures must meet the following standards, among others:

(a) Tests and other evaluation materials:

(1) Are provided and administered in the child's native language or other mode of communication, unless it is clearly not feasible to do so.

(2) Have been validated for the specific purpose for which they are used; and

(3) Are administered by trained personnel in conformance with the instructions provided by their producer.
(Federal Register, 1977, pp. 42496-97)

In special education assessment, a multidisciplinary team approach is used. This guarantees that the students' assessments will not be fragmented and that educational decisions are not made solely on the basis of one test result. One assessment, therefore, will not outweigh placement determination. But if the evaluation team has limited knowledge of the child's language and culture, the child is still apt to be misdiagnosed and inappropriately placed in a special education program.

A pervasive problem with the multidisciplinary team approach is that in theory all members of the team contribute equally to decisions made on educational placement. In practice, the psychologist's interpretation and recommendations are given more weight than the other members'. Although the psychologist often bases recommendations on one or two testing sessions, the teacher's opinion may often be overpowered by the prestige and authority of the psychologist.

III. Recommendations for the future.

The assessment of Hispanics is fraught with controversy and difficulties. Test content; evaluator's attitudes and expectations, the students' language, culture and socioeconomic status; are important factors which affect performance. The typical white middle-class experiences may be alien to the child whose world view is totally different.

Serious attempts by test developers, teachers and psychologists must continue in order to provide alternative evaluative methods which will not penalize the Hispanic student on account of cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic factors. It is obvious that no one test can fairly evaluate any child. Multifaceted evaluation techniques are necessary to tap into a child's total development. Criterion referenced tests, systematic observations, language dominance and language proficiency tests, medical evaluations and home environment data are as important as formal educational and psychological evaluations in providing a comprehensive indication of a child's academic performance, level of development and any other information needed to make appropriate educational decisions.

Criterion referenced tests.

Criterion referenced tests provide a good alternative to the cultural and linguistic biases of standardized or norm-referenced tests. In contrast to norm-referenced tests, these compare an individual with some established criterion or performance standard and not with other individuals. In these tests a limited number of very specific behaviors are measured and through their use, we can obtain information on what a child can do and what a child cannot do. They are very useful in assisting teachers in the establishment of educational objectives. The level of a child's performance in a given task as well as the child's deficits in skill mastery are tapped by criterion referenced measures.

It is important that in developing criterion referenced tests, instructional sequences and specific instructional objectives be available.

Observation.

Systematic observation techniques can also provide invaluable data for the comprehensive evaluation of students and responsible instructional decision making. Observation is the process of systematically looking at and recording behavior for the purpose of making instructional decisions (Cartwright and Cartwright, 1974, p. 3). Choosing instructional objectives, sequencing objectives and teaching procedures, selecting teaching methods and instructional materials, behavior management, grouping, and progress evaluation can all be aided by systematic observation techniques.

Through systematic observation, a teacher can determine whether a child is exhibiting some type of deviancy as compared to his or her peers. Time sampling, checklists, rating scales, anecdotal records can be used in assessing a child's behaviors. This observational data can then be used to cross-validate formal testing results. Longitudinal observations providea more accurate picture of students' behaviors than results based on one testing session.

Language dominance and language proficiency testing.

Before any formal tests are administered to a Hispanic child, a determination of the child's language dominance and language proficiency is needed for several reasons. First, to determine the language in which subsequent testing is to be done. Second, to determine whether bilingual

professionals are required to assess the child. Third, to determine whether any problem exhibited by the child is due to low academic skills, learning disabilities or language difficulties.

Language tests must be administered by trained personnel, fluent in the child's native language and familiar with the child's dialectical variety of Spanish. If a Puerto Rican child is asked to point to the picture of a "naranja", she may have difficulty understanding the unfamiliar term. The language evaluator must be aware that there are regional differences in Spanish and that judgments must not be made about the specific dialect the child speaks.

A complete language profile on a Hispanic child should include expressive and receptive language skills as well as the level of proficiency in the native language and in English (oral and written).

If evaluation measures which are commercially available do not provide a complete language profile, informal measures of language assessment can be used. Structured elicitations or samples of spontaneous speech can be utilized for this purpose.

Medical evaluations.

Medical records are valuable sources of information. A child experiencing academic difficulties may not lack intellectual potential, but may be experiencing a physical problem. Hearing and vision tests are especially important, since problems in visual or auditory acuity cause learning difficulties. A hearing loss caused by recurrent ear

infections may affect a child's linguistic development. Medical records are therefore useful in identifying problems which may affect a child's learning process.

Home environment data.

As with medical records, data obtained from the home can shed some light on a child's difficulties in school. Living conditions, social, cultural and religious customs, family relationships, are all important factors in evaluating the total child. Parental interviews can also fill gaps in children's school records. Has the child suffered separation traumas, how long has she lived in this country, what language does she speak at home, does she experience difficulties in relating to adults, what are parent's educational expectations for the child, are parents planning on returning to their country? The answers to questions such as these are important in determining whether home factors are influencing school behavior.

Determination of learning style.

Knowledge of a child's preferred learning modality is an essential component in establishing educational goals. A child's learning style may be culture-related. Certain cultures, for example, value cooperativeness over competitiveness, performance over speed, spiritual satisfaction over material gains. A culturally different child may perform poorly in a testing situation or learning environment based on a totally unfamiliar scale of values. A child may be penalized for working slowly but carefully on a test because this conflicts with the dominant culture's value of speed. Identification of a child's learning style is essential

in choosing tests to be administered and in the interpretation of test results.

Any evaluation of Hispanic children must consist of multiple components to appropriately assess the child's performance and potential.

Evaluating the evaluator.

Once psychologists and teachers are licensed in their field and tenured within an educational system, it is assumed that no further professional evaluations are necessary. Tenured professionals may or may not continue to enhance their specialized skills and they may or may not choose to incorporate recent educational research findings into their practice. The quality of psychological and educational assessments is rarely evaluated. Assessment reports are not spot checked to determine whether they fulfill the requirements of responsible and professional standards. Therefore, we are frequently exposed to a gamut of evaluation reports which range from excellent to mediocre to shoddy. Evaluators need to be evaluated and held accountable for the interpretations of test results and for the educational recommendations they make. Evaluations must be monitored by competent, knowledgeable supervisors for clarity, precision, appropriateness of test battery, sensitivity to linguistic and cultural differences among the population tested and for the quality and relevance of educational recommendations.

School districts' role.

In addition to establishing monitoring systems for evaluation of assessments, school districts must assume the responsibility of developing and/or purchasing appropriate assessment tools to use in the evaluation of Hispanic students. Staff training is also necessary to assure appropriate interpretation of test results in linguistically and culturally different children and to heighten the awareness and understanding of evaluators on minority issues in testing. The recruitment of competent, qualified and truly bilingual evaluators must become a priority in local school districts.

Teachers' role

Teachers are continuously evaluating children. Informal assessment instruments, developed by teachers, are often used. Formal tests may also be utilized. Since teacher attitudes and expectations may substantially influence a child's performance, it is essential that the sensitive teacher re-evaluate her decisions on an on-going basis. Decisions made on ability grouping, referral for special education evaluations, participation in enrichment activities must not be colored by a teacher's negative attitude towards the child's language, culture or social class. Nor should these decisions be influenced by knowledge of test scores.

One of the most important roles of any teacher, especially one working with linguistic minority children, is that of a child advocate.

Often it is in the hands of the teacher to safeguard the rights of minority children to nonbiased evaluations. If a teacher suspects that a child has been discriminately assessed, there are several avenues she or he can pursue to register a complaint and obtain redress for discriminatory practices. Complaints can be filed, anonymously if so desired, with state and federal agencies or with advocacy centers. It is important that teachers assume an activist position to guarantee the rights of children.

IV. Conclusion.

Testing has placed an unfair burden on the Hispanic child. The effects of irresponsible score interpretation and insensitive testing techniques should not be borne by the victims of biased practices. It is time that evaluators and ultimately school districts assume the responsibility of exploring non-biased evaluation methods for Hispanics and other linguistic minorities. It is time that agencies such as OCR develop a strong monitoring arm to enforce compliance with court decisions and statutes affecting the assessment of language-different children.

Let us place the onus where it belongs.

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